



# Terrorism

**T**ERRORISM is one of those words that gives a lot of trouble. As the dictionary indicates, it had its origin in certain episodes in the French Revolution 1789-94, an historical event much admired by the French who have lately been celebrating its 200th anniversary. But more recently the meaning of the word has shifted, and it has acquired political overtones. Indeed, according to Noam Chomsky, it has now become simply a tool of political indoctrination. However that may be, his division of the genus *terrorism* into the species '*wholesale*' and '*retail*' is useful, as is his drawing of our attention away from just the one species to the genus as a whole.

This note is related to an exercise in Kelley's *The Art of Reasoning*: G on p. 55.

## • Oxford English Dictionary\*

**Terrorism** . . . [a. F. *terrorisme* (1798 in *Dict. Acad. Suppl.*), f. L. *terror* dread, TERROR: see -ISM.]  
A system of terror.

1. Government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the Revolution of 1789-94; the system of the 'Terror' (1793-4): see TERROR. . .

2. *gen.* A policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted; the employment of methods of intimidation; the fact of terrorizing or condition of being terrorized. . .

**Terrorist** . . . [a. F. *terroriste*, f. L. *terror* TERROR: see -IST.]

1. As a political term: a. Applied to the Jacobins and their agents and partisans in the French Revolution, esp. to those connected with the Revolutionary tribunals during the 'Reign of Terror'. . . b. Any one who attempts to further his views by a system of coercive intimidation; *spec.* applied to members of one of the

extreme revolutionary societies in Russia. . .

\* This dictionary lists no use of the word later than 1905.

## • Noam Chomsky: (1987)\*\*

St. Augustine tells the story of a pirate captured by Alexander the Great. "How dare you molest the sea?" asked Alexander. "How dare you molest the whole world?" the pirate replied. "Because I do it with a little ship only, I am called a thief: you, doing it with a great navy, are called an emperor."

The pirates answer was "elegant and excellent," St. Augustine relates. It also captures with some accuracy the current relations between the United States and various minor actors on the stage of international terrorism, such as Libya and factions of the PLO. More generally, St. Augustine's tale illuminates the concept of international terrorism in contemporary Western usage, and reaches the heart of the frenzy over selected incidents of terrorism currently being orchestrated, with supreme cynicism, as a cover for Western violence.

The term "terrorism" came into use at the end of the eighteenth century, primarily referring to violent acts of governments designed to ensure popular submission. That concept is plainly of little benefit to the practitioners of state terrorism, who, holding power, are in a position to control the system of thought and expression. The original sense has therefore been abandoned, and the term "terrorism" has come to be applied to "retail terrorism" by indivi-

duals or groups. Whereas the term was once applied to emperors who molest their own subjects and the world, it is now restricted to thieves who molest the powerful.

Extricating ourselves from the system of indoctrination, we [that is, Chomsky in his book] will use the term "terrorism" to refer to the threat or the use of violence to intimidate or coerce (generally for political ends), whether it is the wholesale terrorism of the emperor or the retail terrorism of the thief.

The pirate's maxim explains the recently-evolved concept of "international terrorism" only in part. It is necessary to add a second feature: an act of terrorism enters the canon only if it is committed by "their side," not ours.

[Chomsky then goes on to cite examples of "state terrorism" such as Israeli bombing of Palestinian refugee camps, South African attacks on Angola, CIA plots against Cuba, Israel's invasion of Lebanon, etc., which are not ordinarily termed terrorism.]

\*\* *Pirates and Emperors; International Terrorism in the Real World* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987), pp. 9-12. Chomsky is a distinguished scholar in the field of linguistics who is also a left-wing critic of American foreign policy, among other things.



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